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Viewpoint
Redefining city governance: towards rapid-response open planning

Global crises such as COVID-19 produce a variety of responses, locally in towns and cities, and nationally from governments. The UK's approach to 'lockdown', 'testing and tracing' and 'social distancing', as well as its financial stimulus to mitigate the effects of the crisis, reflect the political outlook of the prevailing government as well as the particular conditions that make up nation states – people, finances and even its institutions. These different components produce highly uneven paths, and while there is much controversy about the optimal course of action, there is consensus that COVID-19 will have long-term repercussions and impact on many aspects of society, which will necessitate changes to our daily lives for years to come. In business and management, crises invariably produce innovation spikes with disruptive effects that ultimately benefit society. Schumpeter's (1942) work on creative destruction notes 'the gale of destruction during downturns'. While this is certainly the case in business, in which there is a flurry of innovations during a time of much upheaval and contraction, we also argue that this is the case for wider systems of innovation, which we explore here in an urban planning context.

Traditionally, urban planning has been viewed as a paradigmatic practice through which land use, service planning, design, architecture, heritage, transport, utilities and even economies are planned for and take place. While there has been some previous recognition of the frailties of urban planning models, which arise from the tension between space and politics (see Gualini, 2015), the rigidities of the system itself, which require more than deregulation (Goodchild, 2010), and the nature of stakeholder cooperation (Simpson and Chapman, 1999), what has been laid bare by COVID-19 is the need for speed and agility. Planning has needed to apply critical thinking, communication and problem solving rapidly to address quickly evolving and complex challenges. One might even argue that current approaches to urban planning, which individually have merit, lack a comprehensive understanding of what is needed in practice and at speed, which has been exposed by the pandemic. We take as the starting point the different characteristics and merits of, e.g., rational–comprehensive, incremental, transactive, communication, advocacy and equity approaches, which cover the broad spectrum of theoretical and practice-based approaches to urban planning currently in operation.

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COVID-19 has accentuated the pressures which some urban areas such as Leicester are continuing to address as a result of the 2008 global financial collapse. The pandemic has placed further pressures on social and health vulnerabilities, food security, work, income, economic well-being and even transport and education, which all require urgent and significant responses. As Mbuvi (2020) notes, in developing countries there is tremendous pressure placed on housing, transport and infrastructure, as well as essential services, which are inhibiting responses to social distancing, personal hygiene and access for emergency services. In developed countries and in the UK in particular, the pandemic has placed a spotlight on the resilience of towns and cities, and the effectiveness of the urban planning system itself. Urban planning practice in the UK includes techniques such as long-range modelling, zoning, mapping and analysis against wider demographic changes, demands for essential services, transport patterns, food demands, land use and so on. The system is not designed to deal with short-term issues and external shocks of the magnitude seen with COVID-19. As a result, there is a sense that urban planning has faltered, and in practice urban areas have looked towards creative destruction to address the current challenge.

Universities, with their predisposition to re-examining, reconsidering, and reinventing (Faust, 2010), are uniquely placed to support disruption brought about by COVID-19. Their recent experience of being under the spotlight – balancing the competing narratives of research/knowledge and skills for the marketplace, with those of 'normal science' and civic and community engagement – provide a breadth of skills and experience to bring to bear on solving the complex and rapid planning needs presented through this pandemic. While universities are repositories of skills and knowledge, their wider skills in building cultures and political understanding, in modelling environments that promote dialogue and debate, and in the exchange of ideas through interactions are particularly useful for solving lived problems. While COVID-19 risks driving globalisation into retreat and creating inward-looking cultures, hastened by the closure of physical borders and the slowing of transit, universities have been notable in proliferating exchanges of staff and students, and deploying open responses. In some ways the pandemic has reframed the question of the role of universities in a changing society.

Drawing on the experience of Leicester, the largest city in the East Midlands (pop. 470,000) with an elected mayor, we find evidence of changing planning culture, which might be described as open and responsive. The defining characteristics of this are the open-governance approach of the planning authority and the interventionist approach of De Montfort University, which could be viewed as a de facto planning role. De Montfort University is a post-1992 university located in the heart of Leicester (27,000 students, 3,250 staff) and boasts a strong strategic relationship with its local authority and elected mayor. The authority benefits from the soft knowledge

exchange of staff and the social capital of students. In 2015, this arrangement was formalised through a signed agreement to work together for the city, which cemented De Montfort University's third mission role. The agreement was sandwiched been two notable innovative interventions. The DMU Square Mile project sought to work with people living within an area of deprivation near to the city campus. Later, the Local+ programme connected teaching and research to the direct challenges faced in City Hall, which brought academics and council staff together to address local issues jointly in real time. These initiatives emerged through strategic development between the university and city council leaders, and enabled the two stakeholders in the city to share resources and ideas and work towards shared goals. Over time, and as trust has deepened, so the nature of these activities has become more agile, proactive and influential. These relationships provide the early foundations for the rapid-response open-planning model adopted by Leicester since the onset of COVID-19.

The pandemic has presented the city with complex problems, many of which key stakeholders have never faced or experienced before. The degree of the unknown – how long, how extensive, to what scale – presents a set of issues and ongoing challenges that extend into the medium and long term. Some of those are foreseen – for example, economic impacts – while others are unknown and require new levels of expertise and resources on a massive scale, across a broad spectrum that captures divergent aspects of urban living – from health, to architecture, to transport.

Responsive open urban planning in COVID-19

Since the start of the lockdown on 23 March 2020, Leicester City Council has led on addressing the immediate impacts of the crisis, through delivery of key services and supporting the most vulnerable in society. Drawing on its long-standing partnership with De Montfort University, Leicester City Council began to share problems and discuss securing resources and sharing solutions and, in some cases, equipment. The authority's earliest dialogue with the university referred to initial issues of humanitarian assistance, and the supply of staff and student volunteers for food distribution, supporting vulnerable people in isolation, and creating and distributing personal protection equipment (PPE). Three weeks into lockdown, the city council held the first conversations to forge a collaborative approach to the crisis. The early discussions identified that collaboration was open and that problems and responses would be co-owned, and recognised the benefits that would come from joint problem solving and resource sharing. It was also recognised that the university could serve as a useful conduit to communities, working outside traditional lines of authority, communications and bureaucracy.

The mayor, Sir Peter Soulsby, took an early interest in the discussions and the potential for COVID-19 to transform the city's governance – the opportunity to do things differently. assistant Mayor Kirk Master notes,

> As the COVID19 pandemic began to take hold it quickly became apparent this situation was going to lead to many new challenges and opportunities. The need for communities, the vulnerable and the BAME population started to establish itself. How do we focus and think outside the box, how do we utilise the expertise and knowledge base to map this uncharted course? Here in Leicester we are blessed with two great Universities with a plethora of knowledge … An approach to DMU was made and after some shaping and formatting we had a captive audience of academics that could link into the statutory machines of local government. Innovative ways of working and thinking are flowing … a first in the country maybe! DMU stood up to the request and they now work in collaboration with the Leicester City Council for the betterment of our city and to build back better from the impacts of COVID-19. (Master, 2020)

Using the opportunities in the pandemic to make long-term improvements to cities and communities has been supported by the United Nations (UN). DMU is a global academic hub for one the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 16, peace, justice and strong institutions. This role gives the university leadership for the 2030 SDG agenda and to follow the UN's call to find new ways of working to benefit the planet. The Leicester model draws parallels with the Building Back Better Model and the central involvement of key actors in urban decision making and planning (United Nations, 2020). Building Back Better (BBB) was popularised during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, where it was recognised that the period immediately following disaster is the optimal time to make changes to community and strategic approaches. The post-crisis reconstruction and recovery phase presents a unique opportunity and space to introduce new ideas, technologies and thinking. As such, it plays a central role in disaster management and emergency-planning approaches but also speaks to the unique set of issues thrown up for urban planning through this crisis.

BBB has three key approaches, which speak to urban planning:

1 Risk reduction – putting measures in place to improve the structural resilience of the built environment, whether land-use planning or multi-hazard analysis.
2 Community recovery – prioritising support for the social and economic recovery (and mitigating the effects of collapse) for affected communities during rebuild phases.
3 Effective implementation – putting in place suitable and robust institutional mechanisms, legislative frameworks and monitoring and evaluation processes to improve the efficacy and efficiency of resource use.

At the heart of BBB is social capital, and specifically the connections and communication between stakeholders. The relational aspects of social capital (trust and reciprocity, shared narratives and behaviours) and cognitive social capital (the capacity for the city council to absorb skills and ideas, and for DMU to react to problems) are also instrumental to the success of the process. Here we note the value of De Montfort University's public-engagement arm and the social outlook of its civic university

roles, which sometimes sit precariously within the narrative of the economic value of universities. De Montfort University is worth some £500 million to the local economy (De Montfort University, 2019). One in every 30 jobs in Leicester is attributable to the university and 33,400 hours of volunteering by staff and students each year create an additional £482,000. Even within this strong context, it can be difficult to argue for social interventions in the city, and the use of scarce resources for local good, but De Montfort University thrives as a 'game changer' and looks to lead by example in the higher-education sector.

From open urban planning to shared urban governance roles

There is an obvious dialectical tension between social needs in the city, local resources and game-changing behaviours needed to create system innovation (Figure 1). While the BBB model, which has been cited in Leicester during early discussions, provides one viewpoint on game-changing behaviour, there have been complementary models (see Institute of Place Management, 2020) that underscore joined-up approaches, and which Leicester has attempted to enact.

The announcement of the lockdown in March created an immediate response by the university to support city planning and response functions. Some staff were redeployed to NHS services or seconded through the DMU Local volunteering programme to participate in activities typically delivered by students, such as food bank operations and working with vulnerable people. Virement of research resources and equipment to new rapid-response projects demonstrated proactive and supportive approaches taken in consultation with local authorities, and the internal prioritisation of civic roles above those valued by the Research Excellence Framework (REF). At a time when universities have needed to respond quickly to COVID-19 through transformation of its teaching delivery, De Montfort University had the foresight to initiate a wave of projects tackling joint priorities for the local economy, environment, infrastructure, health and community that are expected to inform future teaching and research. With Leicester's lockdown prolonged, even while the rest of the UK opened up, the city has increasingly looked towards De Montfort University to mobilise action – mobilising key academic's proposals for BBB, then consulting with the business and then community sectors to enact local responses.

De Montfort University's ethos is fundamentally civic and has always strived to lead by example, emphasised in its recent #Proudtobemore marketing campaign (De Montfort University, 2020). What some may see as self-approving, others see as new models of governance and, as argued here, new ways of planning. In Leicester, we argue that the actions of stakeholders such as De Montfort University to take up civic responsibilities during a crisis represent the sort of behavioural change that

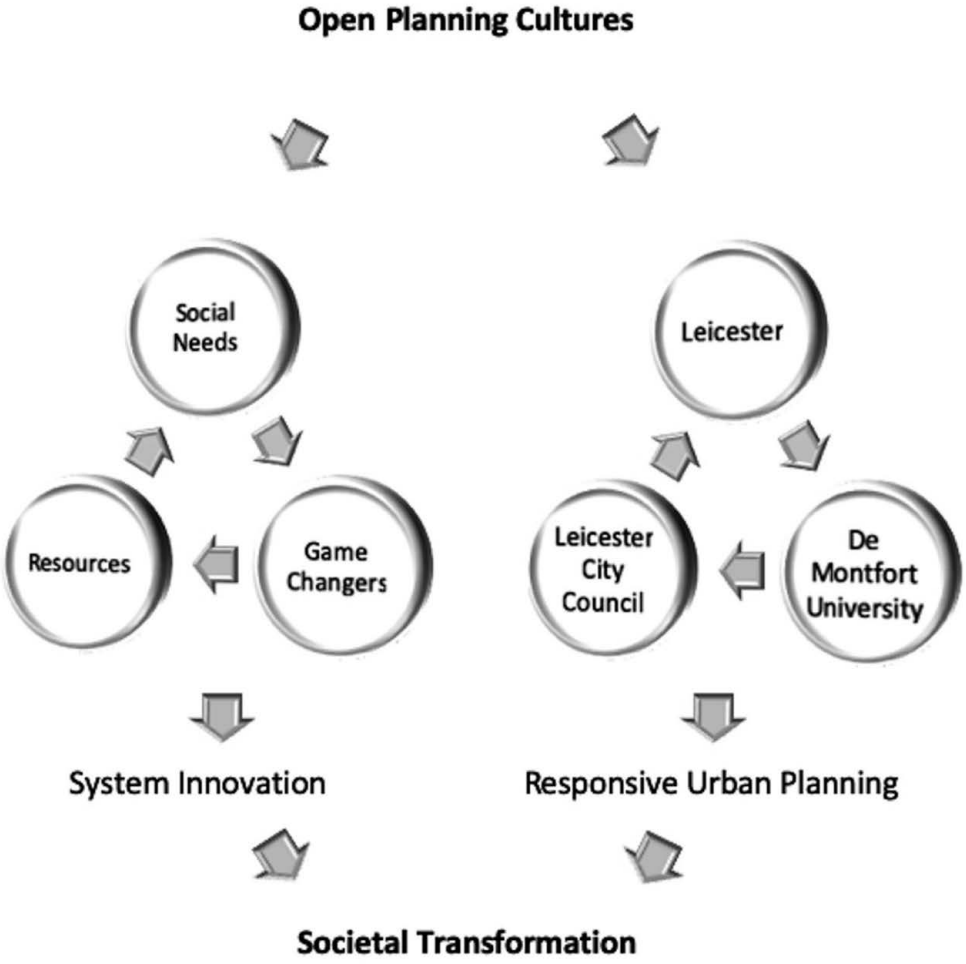

Figure 1 Components of System Innovation in Leicester
Source: Authors

creates resilience and is best placed to tackle complex challenges at the local level, as well as bring about societal transformation advocated through the BBB model. This emerging role for universities sits outside the traditional three missions of teaching, research and economic and social development to introduce the use of its intellectual capital in the urban planning system. We argue that this fourth role will become a prevalent device as major organisations, authorities and communities find urban resilience tested by increased challenges to sustainable development derived from global issues like pandemics, climate change and population change. The use of intellectual capital at the embryonic planning stage rethinks the nature of how new knowledge is developed and applied by introducing and testing real-time solutions in communities of practice.

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